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A Love-Hate Relationship: Personal Narratives of Pride and Shame as Patriotic Affects

Mark Helmsing

The Office of Alumni Relations for George Mason University—in Fairfax, Virginia, where I teach—is located centrally on the campus. The exterior of the building faces a busy walkway, displaying in vinyl lettering the official slogan of the university’s alumni association: “once a Patriot, always a Patriot.” This motto refers to the university’s Patriot mascot and implies that once a person joins the university as a student, that person becomes a Patriot and will forever remain a Patriot, which, the alumni office presumably hopes, will result in feelings of goodwill that prompt generous financial contributions from alumni donors.

In considering the questions posed to authors for this issue of *Bank Street Occasional Papers*, I think about the way the alumni association slogan performs its own assumptions of patriotism: because you *are* a (George Mason) Patriot, you must feel things for the university as a (George Mason) Patriot. Patriotism works as a kind of sociocultural cement to bond and hold members of pluralistic communities, nations, and states together (Soutphommasane, 2012; Taylor, 2002). Identifying the bonding agents that activate the properties of patriotism as a type of cement can help explain how patriotism works.

In this essay, I (re)construct three autobiographical moments that recall how I experienced patriotism as a student, high school teacher, and university professor. In these narratives, I read encounters with patriotism to look for the affective components at work when patriotism takes shape in moments of performing some aspect of my relation and affiliation to America. In thinking about how patriotism shapes these moments, I focus on two specific affects: pride and shame. For Fortier (2005), whose work I draw on to theorize my experience in this essay, a consideration of pride and shame helps us see patriotism as a mode of relating to the nation, a kind of affiliation that binds citizens to a community, nation, or state. By describing and explaining how I have experienced patriotism in different moments of my life, I offer readers a way to consider how patriotism allows us to simultaneously celebrate and question our own relationship and affiliation to the nation – a love-hate relationship of sorts (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Loyalty and Affiliation

I see patriotism as an issue of belonging, particularly a type of belonging through emotional ties to one’s country of close affiliation. Defining what counts as a close affiliation is tricky, but Bodnar (1996) specifies that one can define a close affiliation by loyalty and the strength of the tie or bond one has to one’s country. I want to consider and unpack the implication this may have for teaching.

As a social studies educator in the United States, I am often expected to have a close affiliation to the idea of America, defined here as both the country of the United States of America and as the imagined construct of America as an idealized space in the world, a home for me by virtue of my U.S. citizenship. Because I teach its history, its cultures, and its character and identity through narratives, beliefs, and

understandings of what America is, has been, and will be (or what it should be through strict normative understandings of America as a national, collaborative civic project), many people I meet think that I must love all things American: the Fourth of July, George Washington, and other strong symbols and icons of a particular vision of America that pervades the field of social studies education. Indeed, when I moved to Northern Virginia outside of Washington, D.C., many of my friends assumed I would be excited to be “so close to it all,” by which they meant colonial history in Williamsburg and Mt. Vernon; U.S. Civil War-era history at Harpers Ferry and Antietam; and the memorials and monuments of American national identity on the Mall near the White House and U.S. Capitol building.

Patriotism as a construct of belonging through emotional ties to one’s country carries the assumption that any American should want to see, visit, or be near all of these markers of American patriotism. For me, by virtue of my profession as a social studies educator I am doubly expected to possess a loyalty and affiliation to these markers. Thus, I am assumed to possess an inclination to take in and enjoy America because it is a primary object I teach to students. I am expected to demonstrate bonds of loyalty and affiliation to America just as teachers of other subjects are presumed to have an affinity and affiliation to the content they teach.

Pride, Shame, and Patriotism

For me as a social studies teacher in America, this notion of affiliation is fraught with emotional difficulties. On the one hand, I am expected to speak virtuously of the ideals of the nation. Patriotism works to support, nurture, and solidify feelings of pride for one’s country, one’s history, one’s national identity. And in fact, I do often feel a strong emotional tie and even pride for my country. Patriotism can give rise to or arise from pride, which allows one to celebrate bonds of affiliation, closeness, and love for a place and an ideal, a sense of connectedness and belonging. These feelings can, in some instances, induce actions that occur out of a “sense of pride” for one’s country: volunteering to serve in the nation’s military; donating resources and energies to a cause or campaign; laboring to preserve, create, and protect particular spaces and places rooted to history, heritage, and belonging. I have often been moved by these forms of patriotism.

And yet, I also feel ashamed by the nation when it has failed to live up to my ideals and I struggle with a version of patriotism that “is repeatedly rehearsed by way of sanitizing the attachment to the nation under a veneer of guiltless pride, one which knows no shame or guilt” (Fortier, 2005, p. 565). When patriotism encounters feelings of shame, my recognition of patriotic pride is called into question.

While I would argue that a critically oriented patriotism includes feelings of shame and uses perceived failures of the nation to imagine how we can do better in the future, most normative performances of patriotism do not allow for feeling shameful for the nation failing to live up to a certain ideal. As a patriotic person, must I refuse or disavow feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment for my nation? Fortier (2005) conceptualizes patriotism as a politics that upholds pride and refuses shame; thus, any actions or feelings that question national stories and national identities, express dissent, or attempt to criticize

or condemn the nation are positioned as unpatriotic (p. 566). These actions are threats to the emotional project of loyalty and affiliation to one's country through which patriotism operates.

A patriotism that allows me to feel shame for mis-steps the nation has made allows me to acknowledge that something has gone wrong and must be fixed, corrected, or improved. If necessary, connecting my patriotism to shame allows me to express dismay or even outrage at what is troubling, problematic, or disturbing about my country and how specific events done in the name of the country alter how the idea of my country is interpreted by others both within and outside of its borders. These feelings can induce actions: protesting against a person, action, group, or cause; organizing to improve or ameliorate a bad situation; calling out and criticizing the failings of the past and present histories of one's nation. This is especially true when we shame ourselves by accepting uncritically the patriotism wrapped up in Trumpism and other fascist dogmas that shape public discourse at the time I write this.

However, actions arising in response to shame can appear to threaten or displace patriotic pride and can be seen as diminishing or cheapening the love we have or should have for the country. Thus, pride and shame can collide in the face of competing ideas about what constitutes patriotic acts and feelings.

An event from a family celebration illustrates this process. On Thanksgiving Day in 2017, my uncle, my two adult cousins, and I spent some time debating the actions of the professional football players in the National Football League who chose to kneel during performances of the national anthem before the beginning of games. My uncle argued that to kneel is unpatriotic because it expresses being ashamed of America, as he phrased it, and is a disgrace to the national flag and to the fans. I argued that kneeling is patriotic because the players want their nation to improve and be a better version of itself. Our conversation reached an all too familiar impasse that abruptly ended with the sentiment that we can agree to disagree on what constitutes a patriotic act from a professional athlete in the United States.

Following our conversation that afternoon, a football game aired on the television. As the national anthem started, my uncle instructed one of his young grandsons to place his hand over his heart. The boy refused, loudly proclaiming, "I am not an American!" and "This song is dumb!" His grandfather, predictably, was furious. He instructed the young boy to "act" American: "You are an American, so act like it and show it." I am confident my cousin's six-year-old son was, like many kids his age, seizing the opportunity to capture the attention of people gathered around the television rather than engage in a performative stance of his patriotism. In one sense, the young boy's statement to our family was a way to be contrary and garner attention from us. In another sense, though, he was rejecting the command from my uncle to act American in a specific way that has to accord to normative expectations of pride. To say "I'm not American," even if said in jest as I believe was this case, is taboo in our family. It created tension that went beyond a response of something irritating to something forbidden. I was well aware, perhaps in a way my younger cousin was not, that there are expectations of how to show what is considered a formalized respect for patriotic moments, such as rising for the anthem, or standing at attention to the rising of the national flag.

I share these two different moments from a family holiday gathering to illustrate an imaginary line that separates approved norms for being patriotic from patriotic actions or discourse that can be seen as sub-

versive or detrimental to the cause of the nation. In keeping with what Fortier (2005) says about the politics of pride that circulate around patriotism, my uncle turned his grandson's dissent into a shameful act, assertively laying claim to define for his grandson what a decent, correct relationship is to the nation: full of pride, support, and loyalty, and never, ever renouncing one's identity as an American.

A Patriotic Student

My own questioning stance on patriotism extends backwards into my childhood. As a young boy growing up in the 1980s America of Reagan and Bush, being unpatriotic or simply non-patriotic was one of the most serious transgressions a person could make. Not loving America was such a profound taboo that it ranked highest in my internalized pathological list of shameful feelings, which also included my growing attraction to persons of the same sex, my unease and rejection of doctrines and attitudes professed by my family's Methodist church, and my disappointment at not conforming to expectations of how I should perform my gender as a boy. These transgressions, I suspected, would be marginally more accepted and condoned than the cardinal sin of not feeling love for one's country.

This performative act of showing love and adoration for my country took on an explicitly theatrical mode in 1991. I was in third grade, wearing a red, white, and blue necktie along with other male classmates as we stood on our school stage, singing Lee Greenwood's song, "God Bless the USA." We were part of a pageant honoring soldiers fighting in the Gulf War's Operation Desert Storm. I have a few clear memories of this moment, one of my mother sitting in the audience with tears streaming down her face. I also have a muscle memory of making a fist and jerking it in a rightward motion to accompany the lyrics, "and I'm proud to be an American," as each word reaches a successively higher note. Sometimes I feel this muscle memory in my arm as I walk past the Office of Alumni Relations on campus or stand for the national anthem at a baseball game.

I oscillate between the politics of pride and the politics of shame encircling patriotism. As a child, I associated patriotism with crying, tears, and sadness. Being proud of one's country was a feeling visible only in the presence of tears. I remember seeing my parents cry as we watched Whitney Houston perform the national anthem at Super Bowl XXV during the Gulf War in 1991. I also remember this happening four years later, when my parents and I watched news coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, and ten years later, when they called me in the afternoon of September 11 to ask if I was okay. I remember feeling anxious and uncomfortable, unsure of what to say or what to feel. I felt a sense of shame during the Gulf War Super Bowl performance and Oklahoma City bombing news coverage when my parents were crying. I experienced it as showing weakness. But I also felt ashamed that I did not know how to properly act American in those moments. It seemed evident to me that love of country meant I needed to perform a certain way that was in keeping with my parents' deep sadness and poignant patriotism.

I felt another form of shame in the immediate aftermath of the events of 9/11. As a university undergraduate student in my sophomore year, I had not yet developed a finely attuned political disposition and political identity. I attended town hall meetings, residence meetings, community rallies and protests, and other

civic gatherings to denounce attacks on Muslims and other ethnic minorities in the United States and to call out the hypernationalistic rhetoric spiking around “America First” discourse in the public sphere. I remember a professor grabbing the microphone at a campus town hall meeting to shout that 9/11 was not real violence. He told the audience that the real violence was the naturalized acts of violence – the daily dehumanization and brutalization of poverty, racism, and oppression in America that preceded 9/11.

This encounter with patriotism was bookended by both shame and guilt. I was ashamed to realize this was a lived truth and reality in America—my country—and also ashamed that I neither knew this nor had been able to reach in my own thought what I found to be a profound and startling insight from this impassioned professor. Ahmed (2004) calls our attention to these feelings as she explains that “shame becomes not only a mode of recognition of injustices committed against others, but also a form of nation building” (p. 102). This professor helped me develop an understanding of our nation that is built upon violence and a history that shames me. At the other end of this, as a high school teacher seeking to enlighten my own students as I felt enlightened by the professor, I would learn that using my pedagogy to recognize past and present injustices in America, committed against Americans and others, could easily be seen by my students as performing guilt. To act American, I would learn as a high school social studies teacher, means never having to say you are guilty.

A Patriotic Teacher

As a high school social studies teacher, I found that disavowals of guilt are often never far away from the potential for shame. To illustrate this, I share an event that occurred one day in an eleventh grade U.S. history course at my first high school teaching position. I had been presenting examples from American popular culture in the era of Jim Crow that articulated racial hierarchies in childhood, using examples from blackface minstrelsy, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Raggedy Ann dolls, and the Walt Disney film *Song of the South*. I was attempting to explain how the making of whiteness and blackness was related to citizenship and popular culture in America. After leading a class discussion with my students on their impressions of racial stereotypes in scenes from *Song of the South* that we viewed in class, one student, whom I will call Lucas, asked me: “Helmsing, why do you hate America so much?”

I am forever re-creating in my mind Lucas’ question, his posture in the chair, his halfgrin, the baggy camouflage pants he always wore tucked into his black boots. I pulled out a passive-aggressive move I often used when on the defensive, asking Lucas what he meant and if he could explain his question because I did not understand it. He said that it seemed “all you want to do is tell us America is bad.” Lucas added, “I don’t think you believe in America, Helmsing.” I did not have the courage to admit to Lucas that on most days, the feelings I have for America, while not hateful, range from irritation and disgust to guilt, anxiety, and paranoia. This is no less true in 2018 than it was in 2004, perhaps even more so now.

These feelings, however adversarial they might have appeared to Lucas, came to me through my philosophy of teaching. I’d read enough critical pedagogy in my teacher preparation program to feel an affinity for teaching for social change and social improvement, and to want to open new vistas of possibilities for

my students. I felt a duty to recast how my students thought about America. I was trying to locate in my pedagogy a spirit of dissent that Bercovitch (1993) finds throughout the history of American cultural and intellectual thought, a dissensus that serves “to incite the imagination, to unleash the energies of reform, to encourage diversity and accommodate change” (p. 355).

Johnston (2007) defines patriotism abstractly, as affects that “routinely point beyond the immediately political to something else...the nature of things, the way of the world, or the foundations of life” (p. 22). In this way, patriotism often operates invisibly in social studies education as a socializing machine harnessing feelings, emotion, and knowledge to visions of a possible life expressed through images, narratives, and actions. When I think about the patriotism that animates social studies education, I see Lucas asking me why I hate America. For Lucas, patriotism is not negotiable, its practices and effects are not situational, and guilt over the actions of one’s nation is weak and unacceptable. Being American means loving America, “for patriotism’s self-love is allied with affective exceptionalism,” regardless of any discrepancies or deficiencies in America’s standing, its actions, or its image (Johnston, 2007, p. 23).

Another story from this period in my high school teaching career illustrates these uneasy feelings in performative acts of patriotism. In 2007, the Indiana General Assembly and then-state governor Mitch Daniels passed new laws regulating patriotic expressions in Indiana’s public schools. These regulations required schools to display the American flag in every classroom, provide a daily moment of silence, and promote the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance each morning. I was adamant that I could not be forced to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. My face was hot and flushed with embarrassment when I chose to remain seated when the Pledge of Allegiance was delivered over the intercom system. My students turned around and watched me sit, each day, all year. When a student asked me why I chose not to stand and recite the pledge, I explained my perspective to the class: I maintained that reciting the pledge should be a personal choice that one is moved to do on their own accord and not through forced regulations. At that moment, the context of my politicized choice made visible through my personal action turned into something pedagogical. The patriotism of pedagogy continued to perplex me throughout my time teaching high school students, and, as I later discovered, when I entered the university classroom as an instructor of social studies education methods courses for teachers.

A Patriotic Professor

While living two time zones away from Indiana, Indiana politics entered the university classroom where I taught a methods course in secondary social studies education for teacher candidates. It was November 2016. Then Vice President-elect and former Indiana governor Mike Pence attended an evening performance of the musical *Hamilton* on Broadway in New York City. At certain points in the show the cast was forced to stop performing because the audience would not stop booing Mr. Pence (Saperstein, 2016). According to news reports of the event, cast members thanked Mr. Pence for attending the performance, with cast member Brandon Victor Dixon addressing Mr. Pence directly:

We are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights. We hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values, and work on behalf of ALL of us (Saperstein, 2016).

The following day when my class next met, a heated debate erupted about the appropriateness of the *Hamilton* performers addressing Mr. Pence at the conclusion of the performance, and beseeching him to unite Americans through diversity and compassion and reject the ideologies of divisiveness associated with the burgeoning Trump administration's worldview.

Some of my students felt the action of the musical's cast was a shock tactic, meant to incite an audience they assumed was largely composed of liberals and left-leaning theater patrons. One student argued that both the cast members of *Hamilton* and the music itself (and, presumably, its passionate fans) overlooked the aggrieved "deplorables" who had been ignored, belittled, and marginalized by liberal elites, who were perfectly symbolized by New York City theatergoers.

A group of my students pushed back on this assessment. For them, the darker side of patriotism, allowed to grow with the rise of Trump and his politics, illuminated how racism, intolerance, and bigotry must be called out in every instance, in all spaces, including (and especially) a performance of *Hamilton* attended by the vice president-elect. Confining shame and guilt to abstract racists or xenophobes would not do in this political moment, they felt.

I wondered how to intervene, or even if I should. What should I say? What could I say? The recognition that I should feel something and say something gave way to worrisome indecision. I was not prepared to face a patriotism inflected by new forms of political ideology inaugurated with Trump. How was I to teach patriotism in this moment? How was I to advocate for particular ways to draw upon shared identities as national subjects to act American? The beautiful sentiment about a diverse nation, a better version that American could aspire to be, was, in that moment Mr. Dixon addressed Mr. Pence, a robust patriotic act, that took shame and pride and combined them to an effective invitation to think deeply about how America can be interpreted in a better, more progressive future.

A shared identity for national subjects in America felt somewhat impossible then and still feels somewhat impossible, given the fractious and fractured feelings of belonging and compassion in this first half of Donald Trump's presidential term. The feelings and emotions of nativism, nationalism, White supremacy, xenophobia, and defensiveness coalesce in an ideology often termed "Trumpism" (Connolly, 2018). The national version of patriotism associated with and promoted by Trumpism calls for a belief in "America First" in order to "Make America Great Again," an ideological space in which it is patriotic to call the media the enemy of the people and carriers of fake news, and that uses ugliness, aggression, and denial in the face of any and all critiques and skepticism of Trumpism and the patriotism it performs (or perverts). In opposition to the patriotic feelings produced by Trumpism, many are calling for new forms of patriotic feelings that "would defend our commitment to pluralism while also stressing ideas shared across all of our differences" (Dionne, Ornstein, & Mann, 2017, p. 13).

Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, I have considered my sense of myself as a patriotic person, attempting to think through how I as an educator encounter patriotism. In an introduction to an anthology of writing offering “new stories and art” about being American, Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018) claims “the contest for our American identity isn’t strictly a political affair. It is also a matter of storytelling” (p. xvii). The stories I tell in this essay perhaps present me as shamefaced about what I feel when I encounter patriotic feelings or when I feel attached to “America.” Yet, I find that balancing a politics of pride with a politics of shame provides a hopeful route through patriotic feelings. It is an understanding that now fully informs my teaching and may be informative for others.

Through this balancing of a love-hate relationship to the nation, pride and shame rapidly circulate in ways we may not be able to apprehend in a given moment. At this year’s annual Washington, D.C. Pride Festival, I felt pride for being part of a nation that allowed a free assembly of persons to gather and celebrate a growing acceptance of sexual diversity and love, won through decades of activist organizing and legal, social, and political fighting for recognition and belonging. I was proud to see the Black female mayor of Washington, D.C. march in the Pride parade, along with teachers and students from various schools in the D.C. public school system. I saw people waving both rainbow flags and the national flag of the United States. Later in the afternoon, attending a Washington Nationals baseball game, I was proud to take off my baseball cap and wave it along with other members of the crowd to celebrate U.S. soldiers who had recently returned from active deployment overseas and were admitted as free guests to the baseball game. Simultaneously, I received a notification alert on my phone and then read news updates about unfolding developments related to child migrant detention facilities in Texas, a tweet from President Trump attacking and denigrating Canada, and comments from a Virginia political candidate, Corey Stewart, calling immigrants to the United States “animals.” I felt pangs of grief, anger, sadness, guilt, and resignation, all facets of a shame about America failing to live up to the ideals of openness, acceptance, and tolerance I saw on display at the Pride parade.

The circulation of pride and shame will always play out in those moments when we see, feel, and perform patriotism. They are crucial contingencies through which our understandings of, and commitments to, the nation can be enriched and expanded to include better conversations with friends, relatives, students, teachers, strangers. This can lead to what Railton (2017) describes as a patriotism invested with hope as it acknowledges the dark realities of how the nation has fallen short of whatever ideas, ideals, and ambitions it sets forth for its people. Patriotism is, finally, strengthened through the admission of shame, as it calls us to imagine alternatives to dark and difficult moments in our nation’s past and present, moments we cannot escape or ignore in our teaching, our collective memory and cultural narratives, and in our daily performances of being American.

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